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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000307

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/24/2020

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: BDP TAKES THE HIGH ROAD

REF: ANKARA 164

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

1. (C) SUMMARY. In a February 23 meeting, Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) Co-Chairman Selahattin Demirtas struck a surprisingly moderate tone while outlining the goals and methods for the party. The conversation with Demirtas and other BDP leaders notably lacked any discussion of the PKK or its jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan. This could be in response to Ocalan's directive, delivered through his lawyers on February 19, that BDP distance itself from the PKK and its political arm, the KCK, in order to be effective in the democratic sphere. Demirtas claimed that the BDP planned to support the ruling Justice and Democracy Party's (AKP) plans to reform the Turkish Constitution, but worried that the AKP might not support reforms aimed at helping Turkey's Kurds. He said the BDP is trying to be a party to represent all of Turkey, not just Kurds in the southeast, but that the ten percent electoral threshold prevents it from making gains outside its historical southeast stronghold. END SUMMARY.

BDP Strikes Moderate Tone

2. (C) In a February 23 meeting, newly elected Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) Co-Chairman Selahattin Demirtas struck a surprisingly moderate tone with us while outlining the goals and methods for the party over the next few months. While the BDP national convention on February 1 was full of rhetoric supportive of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), our conversation with Demirtas and other BDP leaders notably lacked any discussion of the PKK or its jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan. Demirtas complained that the former Democratic Society Party (DTP) had some limitations when it tried to break out of the southeast region and appeal to a larger Turkish base. The BDP, however, would focus on all issues, not just Kurdish ones, both inside and outside the Parliament. At the same time, Demirtas continued, there are still problems facing Turkey's Kurds and the BDP would keep fighting to resolve them.

3. (C) On February 19, jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan issued a statement through his lawyers carried by the pro-PKK Firat News Agency that called on the BDP to distance itself from the PKK and its political arm, the KCK, in order to be more effective in the democratic sphere. The BDP should not, however, be critical or hostile toward the KCK, according to Ocalan. It is likely that Ocalan is the source of the

notable and sudden change in BDP rhetoric, both by Demirtas and by MP Sebahat Tuncel, who was also present at the meeting and is usually open in her support of the PKK.

BDP Will Support Constitutional Reforms

¶4. (C) Demirtas stated that the BDP was ready to provide support to the AKP's attempts to pass constitutional referenda, specifically those that would change the Political Parties Law, and lower the electoral threshold to enter Parliament. However, BDP support would come at a price. Demirtas stressed that the AKP would have to show some signs of goodwill, such as: stopping police intimidation of BDP branch offices, allowing the BDP to receive state funds for election campaigns, convincing the media to treat the BDP like a normal party, and releasing BDP members who have been detained. (Note: Over 1,500 BDP members from across the country have been detained in connection with ongoing anti-KCK operations. End Note.) He complained that the international community continues to support the AKP and the government despite how it has been treating the BDP. This tacit approval of oppression of the BDP, Demirtas argued, only strengthens the government's hand against them.

¶5. (C) One of the most important issues for the BDP between now and the general elections planned for 2011 is to lower the electoral threshold to enter Parliament from ten percent to five or six percent. This would allow the BDP to enter parliament as a party (instead of a group of independent MPs, as they did in the last elections) and to have more impact

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after the elections, Demirtas stated. The BDP also plans to potentially form a "joint front" with the Socialist People's Party (SHP) during the elections, especially in the western provinces, according to Demirtas. After the SHP convention on March 13, discussions would begin in earnest on such a coalition. MP Sebahat Tuncel stressed that a coalition could help them overcome the "psychological threshold" that kept them from winning in many western provinces, where people had a negative view of Kurds and, by extension, their party.

¶6. (C) Demirtas told us that the BDP leadership plans to travel to the U.S. in late March to open their representative office in Washington and hold high-level meetings with USG officials. The delegation will likely include Co-Chairs Demirtas and Gulden Kusanak, BDP MP and former DTP Co-Chair Emine Ayna, and BDP MP Sinan Onal.

¶7. (C) In a separate show of moderation, the BDP organized a panel discussion on February 24 on "Military Guardianship and Secularism" in Turkey. Chairman Demirtas and numerous Kurdish intellectuals spoke on the panel, and none of them mentioned the PKK, Ocalan, or the more subtle "will of the Kurdish people" (Note: This is a well-known codeword for Ocalan's will. End Note) Generally, this sort of panel would have been be peppered with such comments.

Comment

¶8. (C) It is premature to conclude that the BDP has turned a corner and decided that the path to democratic politics means distancing itself from the terrorist PKK. However, it is encouraging that this was the first time we have met with the BDP (or with its predecessors the DTP and DEHAP) when neither Ocalan nor the PKK was raised. It is also notable that the BDP would consider supporting some constitutional reforms offered by the AKP, giving the AKP enough votes in theory to move constitutional amendments to a referendum. But we doubt BDP will get very far with the "signs of goodwill" that it will demand in return. Still, BDP seems to taking the first steps toward becoming a legitimate and peaceful party, even if its distancing from the PKK may be at the direction of the PKK itself.

Jeffrey

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